

Canadian Military History

Volume 3 | Issue 1

Article 15

1-23-2012

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Recommended Citation

Granatstein, J.L. (1994) "Canadian History Text Books and the Wars," *Canadian Military History*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 1 , Article 15.
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh/vol3/iss1/15>

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Canadian History Textbooks and the Wars

J.L. Granatstein

A few years ago Robert Martin of the Faculty of Law at the University of Western Ontario wrote an op-ed article in the *Globe & Mail* for Remembrance Day. A graduate of RMC whose father was killed in August 1944 in the 4th Canadian Armoured Division's effort to close the Falaise Gap, Martin had picked up a reader on post-Confederation Canada in an almost absent-minded way. He was, however, furious to discover that there was nothing in the collected articles on the wars — except for pieces on the abuses of civil liberties suffered by minorities. Martin wrote in the *Globe and Mail* that he had lost his father at Falaise once; now he had lost him and his whole generation in the textbooks of the nation, a comment that stirred substantial outrage among veterans and provoked a deluge of abusive telephone calls directed at the unhappy editor of the reader.

Of course, Martin was correct, as even the most cursory examination of texts and readers will demonstrate. War is out and, in an era that wallows in sexual and racial harassment prevention, abuse is in. Thus we can find articles on the "internment" (not evacuation) of the Japanese Canadians, on the mistreatment of minorities in the Great War, and on women in the factories in World War II. On the armed forces, on the battles in Hong Kong, Italy and Northwest Europe, almost nothing. The one exception is R.D. Francis and D.B. Smith's *Readings in Canadian History: Post-Confederation*, the fourth edition of which (1994) now finally includes a boiler-plate article on the events in each of the wars. This is, naturally enough,

alongside articles on the pacifists, the "Bren Gun Girl," and the maltreatment of the Japanese.

Texts are usually even worse. Francis and Smith's *Destinies* (1988) has one page on the "Fighting at the Front" in World War I and two and a half pages on World War II. J.L. Finlay and D.N. Sprague's *The Structure of Canadian History* (1989) manages three pages on 1914-1918 and one paragraph on the fronts of World War II. The most recent text to appear, Margaret Conrad and Alvin Finkel's *History of the Canadian People* (1993) is bleaker still. This book, the very trendiest of social history interpretations yet to appear, is dedicated to "our students" in the hope that "this is the kind of text where they can identify something of their personal past." Their introduction denounces "the small elite of educated white men" who wrote previous textbook histories and whose interests "understandably turned to war and political developments in which they and their peers participated." (Does this not constitute gender, race and class stereotyping?)

Conrad and Finkel's text is different, however, for it tries to show "the impact on ordinary Canadians of decisions made by elites." As their title suggests, this is a book by the people, for the people, and of the people, one designed to showcase the ordinary person's experiences.

Given this as a goal, one might reasonably expect to find ample discussion of the two world wars, almost certainly the most important event in the lives — and deaths —

of Canadians in this century. Surprise, surprise. The battlefields of 1914-18 get part of six paragraphs and one long sidebar that must be the most extraordinary yet written on Canada's role in World War 1:

The shortage of soldiers for the war effort was compounded by the exclusionary policies practised by the Canadian military. Despite the eagerness of some Canadian women to serve overseas, they were unwelcome on the front lines. The only official role for women in the armed forces was as nurses . . .

When Indian, Japanese or African-Canadian men offered their services, they, too, were often turned away.

The sidebar goes on to recount the history of the No.2 Construction Battalion composed of black Canadians.

World War II is treated even more shoddily, only one paragraph detailing the combat efforts of the one million Canadians who served. Predictably, we are once again informed that "Although only men participated in combat, 43,000 women in uniform worked behind the lines . . ."

In other words, even in a textbook that purports to treat the experiences of the people, the wars are bowdlerized and all but omitted except insofar as they advance the

maltreatment hypotheses of the authors. The homefront similarly gets short shrift, and the balance of what little does appear is grotesquely skewed. There is, of course, much more that is incorrect in this volume — a colleague claims to have found seven errors in one paragraph dealing with foreign policy!

What does all this mean? To me, it suggests that the pendulum swing toward social history interpretations which has been underway for a generation has now gone past the limit. If a text this bad can find a publisher and, so I am told, 25 adoptions in universities and colleges in its first year of circulation, then something is most definitely wrong with the historical profession in this country. It also means that unless and until teachers and readers such as Robert Martin complain bitterly in print and to the publishers, this nonsense will continue. It is time for the people to take back their history. Happily, to judge by enrolments in courses in military, political and diplomatic history in universities across the country, this is already in process.

(The post-Confederation text in which J.L. Granatstein is a participant author, modestly omitted from this description, is different.)

J.L. Granatstein teaches at York University and is a *CMH* Contributing Editor.



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